

**Keynote by Denise Klein, Executive Director of Senior Services**

***Aging in Place***

**November 12, 2005**

*There's No Place Like Home. Home, Sweet Home. Home is where the heart is.* These are all metaphors that speak to the fundamental importance of the “home place” in our lives. But if we look more closely at “place” we can uncover many meanings. Like the Bible says about God’s house: In our house, there are many mansions. I want, today, to define that to mean the many places that the concept of home occupies in our hearts and minds.

How many of you dream about houses or rooms in houses that you’ve never lived in? What if these dreams are trying to tell us: we think we live where our bodies live, but what if home is really a *place* inside of us...that place from which we draw comfort, joy, even excitement...that place where we feel we can be ourselves and where our loved ones can be with us? The place where we belong.

As we age, do we need to broaden and change our view of who we are, what our home can be, and what is really important in terms of where we belong? I think we do. But for many of us, aging is a narrowing process rather than a broadening one. This is because:

- Change is difficult
- Accepting disability and/or frailty is even harder, particularly if we have grown used to being able-bodied and completely independent
- Planning ahead for change, disability, even death or death of those we love is an enormous challenge

Having framed my presentation a bit, let me give you some background about me and my work:

- Who I am
- Where I live and have lived in Seattle
- Where I work
- What my organization does and how our vision and mission are changing

Our new vision:

- Joy, health, and meaning for older adults and those who love them.

Our new mission:

- We promote the emotional, social, and physical well being of older adults. (Changed from: we support the independence of seniors).

I mention this because the change in Senior Services’ mission is relevant to what I am going to talk about today:

First, I want to put forward my idea for a desirable goal that encompasses the aging individual, his or her family, housing, aging:

I want to live in a way (including *in a place that*) will bring me and those I love the greatest amount of dignity and joy.

Second, I want to look briefly at the backdrop against which we are discussing this kind of goal and how that backdrop is changing.

Third, I'd like to identify some of the qualities and attributes that will serve us well as we pursue our aging/housing goal.

Fourth, I'll acknowledge some of the barriers that hold us back.

Finally, I'll talk about what we can do to cultivate new assets and address the barriers we can identify in our own situation, with a special emphasis on housing.

## 2. Backdrop and how it is changing.

- The old view: independence; I don't want to be a burden on my children or other relatives and friends; I need to save my resources for the future, for the rainy day; I want to stay put in my family home, perhaps so I can leave it as a legacy to my children....In other words, hanging on for dear life to all that you *HAVE HAD*.
  - The new view: interdependence; there is meaning and joy in helping others, especially those who have helped you; change can be exciting as well as disturbing, ESPECIALLY IF YOU ARE DRIVING IT, RATHER THAN WHEN IT DRIVES YOU....In sum, embracing change and planning for it.
  - The backdrop includes a number of exciting new housing options that exist or should exist soon that mean we no longer need to fear the extreme loss of independence represented by what life in a nursing home meant. Today's event will showcase many of these. The direction is one of choices, options, and greater recognition of the need elders have to retain as much personal power as possible. Like love, however, power may increase as we give it away.
    1. Nursing homes themselves are changing (culture change, neighborhoods)
    2. For those of us with some means, we can make our existing home more accessible and we can populate our lives with in-home services
    3. There are more options than ever before in Assisted living and CCRC's
    4. Universal design in housing should have an impact by the time the baby boom generation grows frail
3. What quality, attributes, resources, will serve us well in pursuit of such a goal? (The goal of living in a way, including in a place that will bring me and those I love the greatest amount of dignity and joy.)
- Increasingly, the only constant is change, so if you are resilient, give thanks; if not, try to appreciate and cultivate resilience
    - The ability to think ahead
    - To compromise
    - To reframe
    - To grieve losses appropriately so we can eventually move on
    - To adapt and modify as conditions change (or, preferably, before they change)

- Acknowledge the importance of interdependence and the good that comes from seeking help by
    - Making it easy to ask for and receive help from others
    - Thinking about others' needs as you contemplate your own
    - Being willing to give up some of what has made you happy in a past that is different from now or the future
  - Make acquiring new tools of knowledge, skills, and information, a lifelong process:
    - Learn new skills (e.g., Internet, e-mail, cell phone)
    - Learn about adaptive technology and use technology even if you need to seek assistance (tell about David's embarrassment at using computer TA)
    - Seek professional assistance (counseling, coaching, or specific focused help in, say, moving)
4. What are the barriers to achieving the goal?
- It is difficult to give up one's dreams and current definition of comfort and joy
    - To be happy, I need a large house
    - A garden
    - To live in the country
    - To drive my own car
  - It is difficult to admit one needs help from others...there are great rewards to being in control and most of us do not experience the rewards of letting ourselves be helped prior to becoming old. Then it's more difficult.
4. What you can do:
- The searching, fearless, personal inventory
    - a. What is my mental, social, physical health now and what is it likely to be in the future, including how well do I see, hear, get around? What happened with my parents? Is Alzheimer's strongly in the picture?
    - b. If I have one, what is my partners' health, etc.?
    - c. What are the important dynamics of that relationship that should affect where we live?
    - d. What is my income and assets? How much can I spend on housing?
    - e. How long should I plan to work?
    - f. Should I be driving? When should I plan to stop driving?
    - g. What are all the things that make me happy when I think about my living space now?
    - h. Are there new things that would make me happy that are very different?